

AN UNWRITTEN DRAMA

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AN UNWRITTEN DRAMA OF LORD BYRON

By
Washington Irving

With an Introduction by
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INTRODUCTION

The following sketch was contributed by Washington Irving to *The Gift: a Christmas and New Year's Present for 1836*, edited by Miss Leslie, and published at Philadelphia by E. L. Carey and A. Hart, late in 1835. Irving's name is given in the Table of Contents and at the head of the article, so that there is no doubt of his being the author, but for some reason neither he nor his literary executors ever collected it. And if we except a reprint made in some newspaper (from which I once saw a clipping) by Joel Benton—no reproduction of the sketch is known to have been made since Irving's death.

Brief as the article is, it concerns so many famous writers that it must have an extraordinary interest for students and collectors, and in several fields of scholarship. Calderon, Byron, Shelley, and Irving are, indeed, names to fire the imagination—and to them may be added that of Edgar Allan

Poe. Frequently it has been suggested that the source of Poe's tale of conscience, *William Wilson*, was to be found in a drama of Calderon's, but as frequently the reply has been made "Washington Irving sought in vain for that drama in the Spanish libraries—how could Poe have seen it in America?" For, in Irving's biographies there are references to his search for the play, though not to this article in which he described it. But this discovery of *The Gift* article sets at rest all other theories as to Poe's source—he himself published a version of his *Manuscript found in a Bottle* in the same issue of the annual, and who can doubt that he took the hint in Irving's final sentence? When he finished *William Wilson*, Poe sent it to Irving for criticism, and Irving on November 6, 1839, wrote* Poe he thought, "The singular and mysterious interest well sustained throughout."

I mentioned this discovery in passing in a note to my edition of Poe's play *Politian* (Richmond, 1923)—and the late Prof. C. Alphonso Smith at once wrote, and bor-

* Harrison's edition of Poe's *Works*, xvii, 54.

rowed a copy of *The Gift*, which is moderately rare. His interest, and enthusiasm over the article which was of such value to students of Poe, suggested to me the desirability of reprinting it. It is here reproduced as exactly as possible from pages 166-171 of *The Gift*, the footnote being due to Irving.

Mr. George S. Hellman, in *Washington Irving, Esquire* (New York, 1925, page 166), describes Irving's MS notes for a projected drama on the Calderon theme. And probably the reference to Poe's asking and receiving permission to use some material of Irving's (referred to at page 329) reveals another phase of the genesis of *William Wilson*. Mr. Hellman writes me he has lost track of his exact source (which may be an unpublished document), but in view of the present sketch one need not doubt its correctness. Poe indeed elsewhere borrowed facts from *Astoria*, but no permission would be needed for that by even the most sensitive writer.

THOMAS OLLIVE MABBOTT.

AN UNWRITTEN DRAMA OF LORD BYRON

By WASHINGTON IRVING

The reading world has, I apprehend, by this time become possessed of nearly every scrap of poetry and romance ever written by Lord Byron. It may be pleased, however, to know something of a dramatic poem which he did not write, but which he projected—and this is the story:—

The hero, whom we will call Alfonso, is a Spanish nobleman, just entering upon the career of life. His passions, from early and unrestrained indulgence, have become impetuous and ungovernable, and he follows their impulses with a wild and heedless disregard of consequences.

Soon after his entrance into the world, he finds himself followed, occasionally, in public places, by a person masked and muffled up so as to conceal both countenance and figure. He at first pays but little attention to the circumstance, considering the stranger some idle or impertinent lounger about society. By degrees, however, the frequent intrusion of this silent and observant follower becomes extremely irksome. The mystery, too, which envelopes him,

heightens the annoyance. Alfonso is unable to identify him with any of his acquaintance,—his name, his country, his place of abode; all are unknown,—and it is impossible even to conjecture his motives for this singular espionage. It is carried, by degrees, to such lengths, that he becomes, as it were, Alfonso's shadow—his second self. Not only the most private actions of the latter pass under the scrutiny of this officious monitor, but his most secret thoughts seem known to him. Speak of him, he stands by his side; think of him, he feels his presence, though invisible, oppress and weigh upon his spirits, like a troubled atmosphere. Waking or sleeping, Alfonso has him in thought or in view. He crosses his path at every turn; like the demon in Faust, he intrudes in his solitude. He follows him in the crowded street, or the brilliant saloon; thwarting his schemes, and marring all his intrigues of love or of ambition. In the giddy mazes of the dance, in which Alfonso is addressing his fair partner with the honeyed words of seduction, he sees the stranger pass like a shadow before him; a voice, like the voice of his own soul, whispers in his ear; the words of seduction die from his lips; he no longer hears the music of the dance.

The hero of the drama becomes abstracted and gloomy. Youth, health, wealth, power—all that promised to give a zest to life, have lost their charm. The sweetest cup of pleasure becomes poison to him. Existence is a burthen. To add to his despair, he doubts the fidelity of the fair but frail object of his affection; and suspects the unknown to have supplanted him in her thoughts.

Alfonso now thirsts only for vengeance, but the mysterious stranger eludes his pursuit, and his emissaries in vain endeavour to discover his retreat. At length he succeeds in tracing him to the house of his mistress, and attacks him with the fury of frantic jealousy, taxes him with his wrongs, and demands *satisfaction*. They fight; his rival scarcely defends himself; at the first thrust he receives the sword of Alfonso in his bosom; and in falling, exclaims, "Are you satisfied!"

The mask and mantle of the unknown drop off, and Alfonso discovers his own image—the spectre of himself—he dies with horror!

The spectre is an allegorical being, the personification of conscience, or of the passions.

Such was the general plan of a poem

which Lord Byron had in mind, several years since; and which he communicated, in conversation, to Captain Medwin, from whom I received it nearly in the foregoing words. The idea was taken from a Spanish play, called the *Embozado*, or the *Encapotado**; and was furnished to Byron by Shelley, as his Lordship did not understand Spanish. The foregoing plan is evidently somewhat vague and immature, and would doubtless have undergone many modifications in the progress of being brought out. Lord Byron intended to treat it in the genuine spirit of Goethe, as displayed in his wild and extraordinary drama of Faust, and expected to make it very effective. It certainly afforded ample scope for the mystic, the misanthropic, the metaphysical, and the romantic, in which he so much delighted; and would have given him an opportunity of interweaving much of his own peculiar feelings and experience.

How far the plan he had in view agreed with the Spanish original, I have not been able to ascertain. The latter was said to be by Calderon; but it is not to be found in any edition of his works that I have seen. My curiosity being awakened on the subject, I made diligent inquiry, while in Spain,

*I.E., A person muffled and disguised.

for the play in question, but it was not to be met with in any of the public libraries, or private collections; nor could the booksellers give me any information about it. Some of the most learned and indefatigable collectors of Spanish literature informed me that a play of the kind, called the *Embozado of Cordova*, was somewhere in existence, but they had never seen it. The foregoing sketch of the plot may hereafter suggest a rich theme to a poet or dramatist of the Byron school.